

Powder River Cowboys back in the States

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FORT LEWIS, Wash. – The smiles will come later.

When the Soldiers of the Wyoming Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 300th Field Artillery arrived at McChord Air Force Base, Wash., March 23, there weren't many overt displays of joy. The men just spent 30 hours in a plane, complete with four stops, on top of 16 months of deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

They were tired and they still had a bus to catch from McChord to nearby Fort Lewis for a week of out-processing. That means briefings and paperwork – the must-dos before they can get their honey-dos at home.

"The only thing we're looking forward to are the barbecue and going home," Capt. Dean Hunhoff, executive officer for the 2-300th, said. "It's been 16 months since we've been with our families. We're ready."

Fatigue and an anxiousness to return to their loved ones in Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska and Colorado were present. So were their feelings of relief and a sense of happiness to be on American soil, more evident the morning after their flight arrived.

"The best feeling though was actually leaving Iraq for Kuwait because that's when it kind of hits you that you're home free now," Spc. Dietrich Wambach, of Guernsey, said. "You just have to take care of the administrative work now."

Wambach and his platoon took shelter from the continuous light rain in their World War II-era barracks, in North Fort Lewis. Staff Sgt. Steven Gonzalez said it was the same overcast, rainy Washington weather they left 12 months ago.

"I would rather take the desert to the rain," the 26-year veteran said. It'll be about a week before Gonzalez will return to the drier environment of Gillette. There's only one issue; he's not completely sure where home is. Gonzalez's wife, with his blessing, bought a new home for their retirement. This was Gonzalez's last deployment. "This is it for me."

Returning home is where all of the Soldiers' minds have been, since Iraq. Hunhoff said one of the last things they did before leaving was make sure all of their cell phones were charged. If a Soldier didn't have a cell phone, arrangements were made.

Just outside the flightline gate at McChord, a sergeant waited in the rain, cell phone in hand, already dialed with a wife on the line. Staff Sgt. Joshua Phillips, of Lander, stopped briefly to shake hands. He was given the phone and told to "go ahead and take it." Phillips smiled and told his family he was home.

The 2-300th will return to a heroes' welcome in Wyoming later this week, on a date and time not yet firm. Hunhoff said they deserve every accolade they will receive.

"I'm still convinced that Wyoming has the highest quality Soldiers in the United States Army," he said. "You hear about the history of the 101st (Airborne Division) and the 25th (Infantry Division) and I'll put our guys up against them any day."

The 101st and 25th were the two units the 2-300th worked with.

"Believe me, everyone (in those units) knows who the Powder River Cowboys are," he said.

Photos available upon request or at the Wyoming National Guard Website
<http://www.wy.ngb.army.mil/PAO/release/release.asp>

SUGGESTED CUTLINE: WELCOME HOME -- Spc. Thomas Bush, of Pavillion, front right, followed by Spc. David Roberts, of Sheridan, make their way through the greeting line at McChord Air Force Base, Wash., March 23, signaling the end of the Wyoming Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 300th Field Artillery's tour in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Among the dignitaries meeting the unit is Wyoming Army National Guard State Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis Russell, left.

SUGGESTED CUTLINE: I'M BACK -- Staff Sgt. Joshua Phillips of Lander, talks to his wife, moments after he and the Wyoming Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 300th Field Artillery landed at McChord Air Force Base, Wash., March 23. The unit completed a 16-month deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

SUGGESTED CUTLINE: IN THE STATES -- Sgt. Clayton Hahn, left, and Spc. Joseph Fiedler, right, both of Cheyenne, make their way from the McChord Air Force Base flightline, in Washington, to their buses. The Soldiers and their unit, the Wyoming Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 300th Field Artillery, returned, March 23, from a 16-month deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.